Introduction: Screening the War on Terror

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Right from the first moment, the 11 September 2001 attacks and the ensuing 'war on terror' were closely associated with film and media. There was the widespread sentiment at the time that the act itself was 'like a movie'. There was the US military's bizarre decision to recruit a 'group from the entertainment industry' in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, to help them 'think outside the box' – essentially asking for advice on how to handle terrorist threats, as if life really was like an action movie.[1] And there were various meetings bringing together Hollywood film and television executives and creatives with government officials (notably senior presidential advisor Karl Rove), which appeared to raise the possibility that an official propaganda line would guide future production of films and TV dramas.

From some in Hollywood there was an enthusiastic response to these overtures. Screenwriter and producer Bryce Zabel, for instance, then chair of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, proclaimed that: 'We are willing to volunteer to become advocates for the American message' (quoted in Cooper 2001). Although there were many who responded very differently, in a sense the prominence of celebrities such as Sean Penn or George Clooney as anti-war voices sustained the impression that the film industry is central to the contemporary politics of war. Certainly the military seemed convinced of its importance, commissioning Hollywood art director George Allison to design the 'set' for press announcements at Centcom, the Central Command base in Doha during the 2003 Iraq invasion. By far the biggest production number to come

out of Centcom was the story of the rescue of a wounded soldier, Private Jessica Lynch, from a hospital in al-Nasiriyah in Iraq. Filmed by the soldiers who undertook the mission, the episode was almost invariably reported by journalists under headlines alluding to Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). It soon transpired that the 'rescue' had not been 'the heroic Hollywood story told by the US military, but a staged operation that terrified patients and victimised the doctors who had struggled to save her life' (Lloyd-Parry 2003). According to one of those doctors, Anmar Uday, interviewed by the BBC in May 2003:

> It was like a Hollywood film. They cried 'go, go, go', with guns and blanks without bullets, blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show for the American attack on the hospital – action movies like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan.
>
> <div align="right">(Quoted in Kampfner 2003)</div>

To complete the circle, Lynch's story – or rather, a mythologised version of it – was almost immediately turned into a TV-movie for NBC titled, inevitably, *Saving Jessica Lynch* (2003).[2]

War Movies

Of course, Hollywood myth-making is nothing new. Yet when ideas were first floated in the weeks following 9/11 about a major, long-term propaganda offensive, harking back to the films of the early Cold War era or even those of World War Two, there were good reasons to doubt that we would see any such thing. Not least was the fact that, as Guy Westwell notes in the opening chapter of this volume, the war film genre short-circuited in the late 1960s and 1970s, unable to reconcile its staple heroic myths with the reality of defeat in Vietnam. George Bush Sr.'s declaration, after the 1991 Gulf War, that the US had 'kicked the Vietnam Syndrome' (Chesterman 1998) – overcoming years of corrosive self-doubt about American power and values – soon proved premature, and similar sentiments from the government of George Bush Jr. sounded no more convincing. Yet in the realm of popular culture, although the Vietnam defeat produced a slew of critical, more or less anti-war movies, these gradually gave way to revisionist films which tended to rehabilitate the war. Westwell locates today's Iraq war combat movies within this context of the genre's development,

examining the claim that the 'greatest generation' cycle of Second World War films produced in the late 1990s and 2000s signalled the rise of a 'New American Militarism' (Bacevich 2005) and a return to something like the myth-making of the 1940s. He argues that although the Iraq war has prompted many critical responses from film-makers, these have largely proved unpopular with audiences; while the few films that have been relatively successful have also tended to be much less critical.

Westwell's main example in the latter respect is Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008), which studiously avoids engaging with the politics of the war by focusing narrowly on the individual soldier. The film seems to recover an idea of heroism, but its protagonist (a bomb-disposal expert) is heroic insofar as he is humanitarian, obeying a moral imperative to save lives. This is a crucial point, not only because of how the Iraq war was presented at the time (as a mission to save and liberate Iraqis), but also because of how military intervention has developed since, with the 2011 'humanitarian bombing' of Libya. The necessity to challenge 'humanitarian' justifications for contemporary military action, as argued in a number of chapters in this volume, is a blind-spot for some critics: Douglas Kellner (2010: 18), for example, contrasts the 'militarist interventionism' of George W. Bush's administration with the 'Clinton-Gore era of relative peace and prosperity'. Yet under President Bill Clinton the US sent troops to Haiti in 1994, sent NATO into action in Bosnia in 1994 and 1995, launched cruise missiles against Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, led the 78-day bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, and kept up a near-constant bombardment of Iraq (along with devastating economic sanctions) throughout the decade. It was precisely in this era of 'peace' that the sort of 'humanitarian' military interventionism seen in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001 became standard operating procedure for Western governments.

The Hurt Locker – and the 'terrains of debate' that surround it – is also one of the key examples discussed by Martin Barker in his chapter on Iraq war films. The film has been widely understood in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) even though, as Barker shows, it does not really fit in the way that critics have assumed. Tracing the history of the category of PTSD, Barker identifies it as a Foucauldian 'system of knowledge'; not simply a clinical diagnosis but an ideological proposition. He critically examines how this widely accepted

discourse has developed in relation to the war on terror, and the Iraq conflict in particular, as a point of consensus between Left and Right in emphasising sympathy for the troops, and as a way to re-cast the US military as victim rather than perpetrator. A second example discussed in his chapter, *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), illustrates this very clearly: the film altered the real story on which it is based in such a way as to remove blame from the troops and to explain their murder of a fellow soldier in terms of PTSD.

The motif of the victim-soldier is also at the centre of Mark Straw's discussion of ostensibly critical war on terror films. *In the Valley of Elah* is again a key example here, alongside Robert Redford's film about the war in Afghanistan, *Lions for Lambs* (2007). Homing in on the question of 'ethical spectatorship', Straw's chapter examines in detail how these movies portray soldiers as victims, not only of US foreign policy, but also of contemporary visual culture. Both films thereby individualise responsibility for war, hectoring us as passive spectators much as Redford's Vietnam-era professor lectures his apathetic student about the latter's lack of political awareness. Straw argues that, although they attempt a reflexive critique of war and media, ultimately these films offer only a narcissistic sense of altruism, encouraging spectators to revel in the feeling of 'worthy' engagement.

The limitations of seemingly critical war on terror films discussed in these opening chapters lend some support to Matthew Alford's argument that Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's (2002) 'propaganda model' of news media can be applied to Hollywood. Alford discusses a number of possible objections and limitations to doing so, but overall he finds that Herman and Chomsky's five 'filters' – concentrated ownership, the influence of advertisers, the use of 'official sources', vulnerability to flak, and the internalisation of an 'anti-Other' ideology – fit this very different context surprisingly well. His chapter draws attention to the structural constraints within which mainstream commercial fare is produced, and in doing so helps to explain the political limits of 'liberal' Hollywood.

Despite such limitations, however, the fact remains that many responses to 9/11 and the war on terror in film and TV have at least attempted a critique. Sounding a more optimistic note, Liane Tanguay's chapter looks at one of the

most critical cinematic responses to date, Brian de Palma's *Redacted* (2007). Bringing a literary perspective to bear, Tanguay develops a comparison between the way that Joseph Conrad's 1898 novella *Heart of Darkness* subverts the conventional detective story, and with it the Victorian imperial aesthetic, and the way that *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Francis Ford Coppola's transposition of Conrad's story to the context of the Vietnam war, achieves something very similar in relation to the hegemonic aesthetic of American 'victory culture' (Engelhardt 2007). Addressing the contemporary context, Tanguay shows how *Redacted* accomplishes the same manoeuvre in comparison with *Black Hawk Down* (2001), Ridley Scott's dramatisation of the 1992 US-led 'humanitarian mission' to Somalia, employing similar aesthetic techniques – a gritty, hyperreal style and handheld-camerawork producing an 'apparently unassailable *truth-narrative*' – but turning them to very different effect.

Popular Pleasures

Of course, cinematic reactions to the war on terror have not been limited to the war film genre, however broadly defined. As Jean-Michel Valantin's (2005) useful category of 'national security cinema' suggests, some of the most interesting filmic treatments of contemporary foreign-policy concerns are often those which take a more allusive and allegorical, or at least a less direct and literal tack. Though the head-on approach of war films has seemed, for the most part, to leave audiences cold, more popular genres have found other ways to address the post-9/11 world.

Kathryn Bigelow may have beaten her ex-husband James Cameron at the 2010 Oscars, winning the Best Picture award for *The Hurt Locker*, but it was Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) that was the winner in commercial terms, rated, at the time of writing, the highest-grossing picture of all time. *Avatar* is among the examples discussed by Fran Pheasant-Kelly in her chapter on fantasy films, along with *The Dark Knight* (2008) and the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* series. Both visually and thematically, these different films mediate the experience of terrorism and war, offering spectators a 'safe' way of experiencing death and destruction, she argues. The indirect messages conveyed about the war on terror in these films vary markedly: Pheasant-Kelly identifies an undertone of militarism in *Lord of the Rings*, a liberal critique of such values in *Avatar*, but more

indirect and ambiguous mediations in *Harry Potter* and *The Dark Knight*. What these films have in common, though, is that in reflecting contemporary concerns they represent a kind of 'working through' of shared cultural memory.

The so-called 'torture porn' genre analysed by Graham Barnfield has also been held to offer audiences a 'safe scare' – and for that reason to be particularly popular with US combat troops. Barnfield's chapter offers a careful reappraisal of the genre – questioning, in fact, how far it really exists as a distinct and identifiable genre in the way many critics have assumed – and sets contemporary debates in the context of earlier trends in (and moral panics about) films depicting graphic violence and horror. He rejects as simplistic the notion that the on-screen representations of torture in films such as the *Hostel* series are responsible for encouraging or excusing real-life torture (such as in Abu Ghraib),[3] in part precisely because the screen violence is gratuitous, as opposed to the plot-driven violence of shows such as *24*, where torture is presented as a rational choice. Rather, Barnfield argues, critics and audiences have latched on to 'torture porn' because the irrational threat dramatised in such films provides a kind of focal point for a wider social unease.

Some popular genres, though, have taken a more direct approach to engaging with the war on terror. As Michael Frank observes in his chapter on the figure of the 'enemy alien' in both science fiction films and official discourse, Spielberg's 2005 remake of *War of the Worlds* was explicitly intended to evoke 9/11 and to revisit the recent experience of Americans being attacked by an unknown enemy. Though it stops short of simply equating aliens and terrorists, Frank argues, the film does echo official constructions of the enemy as radically 'Other'. Frank returns to the observation that 9/11 was 'like a movie', interrogating the different assumptions that often underpinned this long-running analogy. The narratives already familiar from countless sci-fi movies in some senses provided a script for the response to 9/11; a 'political imaginary' through which political leaders and officials sought to explain the necessity for a war against 'alien' terrorists.

Such official perceptions are the target of dark humour in *Four Lions* (2010), one of the comic films about the war on terror discussed in my own chapter for this collection. I argue that such comic treatments – other examples

discussed here are *In the Loop* (2009), *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009), and *Team America: World Police* (2004) – in some respects offer greater insight into the politics of contemporary war and terrorism than 'straight' films, including those that attempt a critique. While more conventional (critical) portrayals tend to stay within the boundaries of a traditional conception of Left/Right politics, comic treatments acknowledge that, after the end of the Cold War, we are in a wholly different political universe. Though arguably limited in various ways, comedies are nevertheless able to get at some essential truths – about the emptiness of Western political life and the correspondingly incoherent character of Al-Qaeda-style terrorism.

Us and Them

The satire of official misconceptions about Muslims in *Four Lions*, and the film's representation of suicide bombers as part of mainstream British culture, are effective because they resonate with real uncertainties. In recent years UK Muslims have found themselves both demonised as the 'enemy within' and simultaneously flattered by politicians worried about offending their sensitivities. Indeed, the first point that Karl Rove reportedly emphasised in briefing film and television industry executives after 9/11 was that 'the war is against terrorism, not Islam' (Cooper 2001) – a point also highlighted in the internal editorial guidelines issued by the BBC in September 2001.[4] Saying who the enemy was not, however, did not settle the question of exactly who the enemy was – especially when worries about offending or inflaming Muslim opinion coexisted with fears of 'home-grown' terrorists.

How enemies are depicted is of course a perennial issue in war propaganda, and also in fictional and dramatic representations of war, in which it is generally felt necessary to have some 'baddies'. But while it may be a long-standing issue, that is not to say it is an unchanging one. Two major events have shaped the context in which we now think about the question of enemies: 9/11 itself, of course, but prior to that the end of the Cold War in 1989.

In the early 1990s, foreign-policy analysts started to discuss the problem of what they called 'enemy deprivation syndrome'.[5] One might think that not having enemies would be an unequivocally good thing, but from a certain point of view it also has major downsides. Most obviously, in the international arena

the lack of a clear enemy raised all sorts of awkward issues. If the Soviets had quit the battlefield, what exactly were Western militaries and defence establishments for? Who were they trying to deter? What threats were they protecting against? What was the point of strategic organisations such as NATO? What, indeed, was the strategy; what was the national interest? All these formerly straightforward questions were suddenly much more difficult to answer. Over the course of the 1990s there were various attempts to suggest that new enemies had appeared. Former allies, such as Saddam Hussein, found themselves abruptly re-cast in the role of the 'new Hitler'. Places that most of us had barely heard of before, like Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo, suddenly became the front line in an epic battle between Good and Evil. The new enemies were seldom very convincing, and rarely did they last for very long. Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milošević, Haitian generals, Somali 'warlords' – they came and went with baffling speed as the media spotlight briefly picked them out then moved on someplace else.

But the second major event seemed to change that. After 9/11, it appeared that the problem of 'enemy deprivation syndrome' might be about to be resolved for the foreseeable future. Radical Islamists and Arabs, it was suggested, might be able to fill the enemy-shaped hole left by the Russians, perhaps in the form of a 'clash of civilisations'. In the event, such was the diffuse and elusive character of Al-Qaeda – and of the phantom menace posed by Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction' – that the construction of these new enemies has not always been as straightforward as some had feared and others had hoped. This makes it all the more important an issue for us to consider. How have Muslims and Arabs been depicted as enemies? Have they been unfairly demonised? What sorts of political and cultural resources do contemporary representations of enemy Others draw upon?

As Bernd Zywietz observes in his chapter examining the portrayal of 'evil Arabs', post-9/11 accusations of Western 'Islamophobia' can be understood as the latest version of long-standing concerns about the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in US film and television (Shaheen 2001). Zywietz does not take these concerns at face value, however: discussing the debates that surrounded two pre-9/11 films, *True Lies* (1994) and *The Siege* (1998), he carefully uncovers the

shifting criteria by which stereotypical images have been found wanting, suggesting that critics have made inconsistent and unrealistic demands. Through a detailed comparison with a quite different cinematic tradition – India's 'Bollywood' film industry – he emphasises the importance of genre conventions in the way that stock characters and situations are formed. Bollywood's generically eclectic 'masala movies' include overtly nationalistic messages about an idealised Hindustan and stereotypical 'evil-terrorist' Muslims – but they also encompass stock storylines that reject official views of conflict with India's Muslim populations and that acknowledge the 'outrage and grief' these communities have suffered at the hands of official policy. There are lessons here for Hollywood, Zywietz suggests, and some signs that these have already started to be learned in the last decade.

The attempt to imagine a different way of doing things also runs through the chapter by Joe Parker and Rebekah Sinclair on representations of the 'subaltern' – understood here as 'illiterate rural women from the global South' – a usually marginal figure who seemed suddenly to have become the centre of elite attention as Western states engaged in 'nation-building' in Afghanistan and Iraq. Focussed on documentary film but reading across to fictional drama, Parker and Sinclair draw on post-structuralist theory to point up the limitations and possibilities of filmic encounters with the Other. Challenging the 'totalising narrative of liberal humanitarianism' they discuss how 'films-yet-to-come' might devise more ethical and politically effective strategies of representation.

While Parker and Sinclair make a forceful case against the 'universalist subject' of Western liberal discourse, in the war on terror it has often seemed that political elites have had as much trouble articulating a sense of the Western Self as they have identifying the enemy Other. A further downside of 'enemy deprivation syndrome' – perhaps, in fact, the main one – was summed up very perceptively by the neoconservative writer Irving Kristol, who said in 1989: 'We may have won the Cold War, which is nice…But this means that now the enemy is us, not them.'[6] Kristol recognised that having the negative example of the USSR had been a valuable political asset. With the sudden demise of the Soviet Union, Western societies now had to stand entirely on their own terms, and it was suddenly much more difficult to say exactly what it was that they stood for. Perhaps this is why, over the years that have followed, political leaders have

engaged in an almost incessant discussion of values – Western values, American values, British values, European values, 'shared' values – although, amid all the values talk, one is hard pressed to find any very coherent or convincing account of what those values might be.

The problem of conceptualising the Western Self is addressed in Hugh Ortega Breton's chapter on what he calls a 'paranoid style' in contemporary politics and popular culture. Ortega Breton successfully takes on the challenge of connecting a fine-grained analysis of textual characteristics with the larger political and cultural context within which these are used to convey recurring themes. Like Parker and Sinclair he reads across both documentary and fictional programming, and through close audio-visual analysis uncovers how the representation of subjectivity in terrorism narratives is shaped by the West's post-Cold War 'crisis of meaning and identity'. One key narrative theme, for instance, is conspiracy theories: Ortega Breton shows how TV programmes dramatising or discussing conspiracy give expression to the contemporary alienation from political agency, depicting the active political subject as malevolent while portraying people positively only when they are vulnerable, fearful and passive.

Somewhat similar concerns frame Jack Holland's analysis of *The West Wing*, a television series beloved of American liberals in the desolate Bush years as a kind of alternative 'good' White House. Holland examines a particularly heightened experience of the crisis of political meaning identified by Ortega Breton, when, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, an elite 'failure to narrate' the attacks exacerbated the sense of shock and disorientation. With official voices silent or inarticulate, popular culture filled the 'void of meaning'. In a departure from its normal storylines, *The West Wing* offered a special episode explicitly teaching the audience how to understand and respond to terrorism – in part by equating 'Islamic extremists' with the Ku Klux Klan and comparing the Taliban with the Nazis. Notwithstanding the show's liberal reputation, Holland demonstrates how it closely followed official US foreign policy stances both before and after 9/11, sometimes espousing even more hawkish views than the Bush Administration.

The final chapter of this collection, Brigitte Nacos's essay on another popular topical TV drama, *24*, also scrutinises the relationship between screen images and real-world experience, challenging the sharp division that researchers usually draw between news and entertainment media. In a bid to win back dwindling audiences, news organisations have created hybrid 'infotainment' forms, she observes, and in any case researchers have questioned whether audiences maintain such a strict fact/fiction separation when they incorporate media messages into understandings of the world (Entman and Rojecki 2000). Fictional characters and situations matter in real-world contexts, argues Nacos, noting how *24*'s protagonist – counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer – has figured in classroom discussions, think-tank deliberations and even election debates. The key question that the series dramatised so effectively, of course, was whether it was legitimate to torture terrorist suspects: *24* provided endless iterations of the 'ticking time bomb' scenario much discussed by lawyers, journalists and politicians. Such was the impact of the show, indeed, that personnel at the Joint Task Force Guantánamo detention facilities not only watched it but reported that it influenced their treatment of 'enemy combatants'.

After a decade of turmoil and instability in world affairs, after two wars that have left hundreds of thousands dead and injured, it may seem frivolous to focus on fictional film and television drama. The impulse to do so, however, is in part given by the nature of the war on terror itself, designed by its architects to be a media-friendly event. Staging the spectacle of 'war on terror', complete with sound-bites and photo-opportunities inspired by Hollywood, was an attempt to offset the Western elite's loss of purpose and vision, to fill the 'void of meaning' in Holland's phrase. It could never accomplish that. But what it did do – not so much through the meetings with entertainment industry executives as through its very failure and incoherence – was to prompt others to try to make sense of the contemporary experience of war and terror in ways that aimed to connect with popular audiences. Ten years on, this volume brings together European and North American scholars working in politics and international relations as well as in literature, film, media and cultural studies to take stock and assess the shape and significance of the post-9/11 cultural moment.

Notes

[1] 'Hollywood on terror', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 21 October 2001, www.abc.net.au/correspondents/s397008.htm. Military cooperation with the entertainment industries was facilitated by the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California: see further Burston (2003), Der Derian (2001), and Michael Frank's chapter in this volume.

[2] Lynch herself has rejected the 'elaborate tales' constructed by the US authorities around her experiences (MacAskill 2007), and said of the film: 'Not all of it was accurate, so I couldn't keep watching it' (in Cole 2005).

[3] Kellner (2010: 9), for example, worries that audiences for popular torture films such as the *Saw* franchise are 'potential recruits' as 'torturers and killers'.

[4] The guidance, written by Stephen Whittle, Controller Editorial Policy, states: 'We must avoid giving any impression that this is a war against Islam', noting that 'we must be careful not to fuel the flames of prejudice and intolerance' (BBC 2001a).

[5] As one commentator puts it: 'as soon as the initial euphoria over the Soviet Union's collapse had passed, most of the American foreign-policy cognoscenti…began to search for a substitute enemy' (Harries 1997).

[6] 'Responses to Fukuyama', *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, available at www.wesjones.com/eoh_response.htm.